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“Say the word and my servant will be healed” (Luke 7:7).

1 Tim 2:1-9; Luke 7:1-10

We have all learned a great deal about distance learning and virtual meetings this past year because of Covid. Today's Gospel story is about a powerful encounter between Jesus and a non-Jewish centurion, even though they never actually meet. The centurion, commander of 100 soldiers in Capernaum, asks the elders of the local synagogue to ask Jesus to heal a valued household slave who is at the point of death. They are eager to convey this request because the centurion is a worthy Gentile who built their house of worship.

Jesus goes with them, but on the way to the centurion's house, a messenger meets them with word they need not violate the Jewish purity protocols by entering a Gentile house, and that a simple command from Jesus will accomplish the healing because the centurion understands the power of authority. Jesus praises the extraordinary faith of this man, greater than any he has found in Israel. The messenger returns to the house, where the slave was healed that very hour.

This virtual encounter was important to Luke, writing for Gentile converts 50 years later, because it affirmed Gentile faith and demonstrated that Jesus' redemptive power was not limited to Israel or to direct contact with him, now risen from the dead and alive in the Holy Spirit. Luke was connected to St. Paul's missionary extension of the faith into Gentile lands, so this affirmation was significant. The familiar words of the centurion are part of the Communion rite, when we acknowledge our unworthiness to have Jesus enter under our roof yet know that just his word is enough to heal us.

As a faith story, we are reminded that believing in Jesus always summons his presence. When we call on him in our personal prayer, he is present. In community, when only two or three believers gather to pray, he is with them. Faith is the essential factor that seeks, asks and knocks, and this always finds, answers and opens a path to grace. No distance or barrier will ever limit God's healing power and mercy from reaching us. Whether we are worthy or unworthy, in the state of grace or mired in sin, Jesus can and will make us whole.

What was true for the early generations of the church distant from the historical events of the death and resurrection of Jesus is true for us. Jesus in his risen life is a timeless presence wherever there is faith. He is available at the centers of formal belief and worship, and at the margins of faith that is faltering and unsure. He is even where desperate seekers at the edge of despair feel unworthy of another chance but still cry out. Like a shepherd in search of lost sheep, Jesus will find and bring them home.

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